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The Choice to Be Made. Georgia's Foreign Policy after the Association Agreement

By Shota Kakabadze (University of Tartu)

Abstract

As a result of the parliamentary elections of October 2016, a political party with a clear anti-NATO and anti-EU political platform made it to the parliament. The Alliance of Patriots was not able to win any majoritarian districts but still managed to receive enough votes to pass the 5% threshold in the country-wide proportional vote. This contribution looks at foreign policy discourses in post-election Georgia and argues that a possible explanation for the rise of such populist parties can be found in the ambiguous messages coming from the West. To be more precise, as the EU's Eastern Partnership does not offer a membership perspective, it becomes harder for the political elite to sell the pro-European foreign policy agenda to the Georgian public. The issue of the two breakaway territories still remains unresolved, Russia maintains a military presence there, while for the foreseeable future NATO and the EU membership is off the table for Georgia. Hence, in such circumstances, unless substantial progress in relations with the Euro-Atlantic institutions is made, the message of the Alliance of Patriots—that pro-Western foreign policy endangers Georgia, leaving it to face the Kremlin alone—could gain more support.

Introduction

In the summer of 2017, Georgia was fighting forest fires all around the country. The strongest of these forest fires was in Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, a place that had already suffered from the same fate during the Russian–Georgian War in 2008. It took a couple of days and support from Azerbaijan, Turkey, Armenia and Belarus to extinguish the forest fire. As is usually the case with Georgian politics, this natural disaster quickly led to political arguments and mutual accusations. Social media plunged into the conspiracy theories, some pointing fingers at the Kremlin, calling the forest fires sabotage and even an “undeclared war” (Kuntchulia 2017). In addition, discussion concerning the possibilities and options of foreign help to fight the fire illustrated the role of Russia in the domestic discourse of the political parties.

News broke that, allegedly, Georgian authorities had asked for help from their Russian counterparts. This move was heavily criticized by the main opposition parties, describing such an act as treason. “Asking the occupants for help” and “same people who started the fire in 2008” became the key reference points around which criticism aimed at the ruling party was mounted. On the other hand, the Alliance of Patriots, the only publicly anti-Western party in the parliament, welcomed such possibility and even encouraged the government to do so. As the leader of the party claimed, none of the European states would have rejected the offer of help coming from Russia (Tabula 2017). Meanwhile, Ada Marshania, an MP from the party, went as far as to argue that such cooperation would have created a good basis for neighbourly contacts. In response to the criti-

cism that Russia was responsible for the fire in 2008, she claimed that the Kremlin may have regretted its behaviour (on.ge 2017). The ruling party tried to distance itself by claiming that there was indeed such an offer, but it was initiated on the Russian side. In addition, the prime minister of Georgia said that Georgia would have considered such an option, as the country would welcome any help, but there was simply no need (on.ge 2017b).

To trace the truth as to whether it was the Russian authorities who expressed their desire to help or the other way around is not the aim of this analysis. What is relevant for the argument put forward here is the ambiguity and debates surrounding the possible cooperation with Russia, Georgia's large neighbour to the north. The key argument is that even though the Kremlin continues to maintain a large military presence and full control over the two breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the taboo against cooperating with Russia on the political and diplomatic level seems to be softening in the public discourse. A possible explanation for this softening taboo can be found in the ambiguous messages about Georgia's Western perspective coming from the Russia.

The key reference point for this paper concerns the results of the parliamentary elections of 2016 and the political agenda brought to the table by the newly formed Alliance of Patriots, which challenges the dominant discourse on Georgia's pro-Western orientation from its stage in the parliament. It is argued below that as the signing of the Association Agreement (AA) and visa liberalisation with the EU has been achieved, the integration process must be taken to a whole new level, the most obvious form of which would be an EU member-

ship perspective for Georgia. Otherwise, with the feeling that Georgia has reached the end of its Euro-Atlantic path, political messages similar to those the Alliance of Patriots is projecting become more relevant and popular. The message that NATO would never accept Georgia as a member, while such aspirations expose Georgia to dangers from Russia, is gaining public visibility. This can be observed by the increased activities of pro-Kremlin NGOs and political parties over the last years. In 2013, the Eurasian Institute founded the Public Movement for Georgian–Russian Dialogue and Cooperation (GeoRus.org 2017), in April 2015, a news agency with its own TV channel—Tbilisi 24 was established, it carries clear anti-Western and pro-Russian messages etc. This contribution argues that the results of the parliamentary elections of 2016, which allowed the Alliance of Patriots to get into parliament, should be interpreted in this context.

Parliamentary Elections of 2016

The result of the parliamentary elections of 2016 was the first major signal to the possible challenge of the state's foreign policy agenda. While Georgian Dream (GD) and United National Movement (UNM) received most of the seats, the major liberal, pro-Western parties were excluded. Parties such as Republicans or Free Democrats were not able to secure seats in the legislative body. Interestingly, the former chairwoman of the parliament, Nino Burjanadze, whose party is famous for its clear pro-Russian stand, also did not manage to receive enough votes to cross the threshold. Such developments can be explained by the general distrust towards political parties in Georgia, which rose from 22% in 2012 to 41% in 2015, while trust went down from 21% to 8% in the same period (Caucasus Barometer 2017a). In this context the newly formed populist Alliance of Patriots, with its xenophobic and homophobic campaign as well as support for a dialogue with the Kremlin, offered an alternative to the older political establishment and received just slightly above 5 percent and thus qualified for the minimum of 6 seats.

It must be noted that the Alliance, unlike Burjanadze's party, was rather careful in promoting its foreign policy agenda. The starting point of its political platform was not the clear rejection of the EU or NATO but rather the idea that the membership perspective for either organization does not exist; hence, it is important for Georgia to start approaching Russia and thinking about restoring diplomatic relations with its Northern neighbour. Party discourse could be described as similar to the right-wing populist parties on the rise across the continent. The head of the party, Irma Inashvili, is quoted as saying, "The contemporary world nowa-

days is throwing away what I call pseudo liberalism and pseudo liberal values. It got tired, it threw it away and is moving to something different and new, and what are these new different things? In reality, it is going back to the past" (Inashvili in Clash of Narratives 2017a). In an interview for the same miniseries about the political landscape in Georgia, she also made an interesting statement that illustrates the key idea of the party's foreign policy platform: "I was 21 when I visited Brussels for the first time and the door to NATO was opening, and we had high hopes. But today I am 46 years old, NATO is still telling us that the door is open but also telling us gently that it will not accept us" (Inashvili in Clash of Narratives 2017b).

From this perspective, one can see the greatest vulnerability for the current official foreign policy agenda on which the Alliance of Patriots can build its Western-sceptic platform. This could also explain the idea of a Georgia–NATO–Russia format, which was proposed by the party. Coming back from its visit to Moscow, the Alliance claimed that it was received with interest by the Russian side (Tabula 2017b). The Alliance of Patriots went as far as holding manifestation in the centre of Tbilisi and announcing a hunger strike demanding the realization of the Georgia–NATO–Russia project (Tabula 2017c). It must be noted that the special representative of NATO in the region has commented in response that the organization is not going to negotiate over Georgia with any third party (on.ge 2017c).

The ruling party, in addition to distancing itself from the oppositional MPs' visit to Moscow, describing it as a private event, firmly continues to be in line with what one might call the dominant discourse. To be more precise, whenever the discussion of possible meetings between the heads of Russian and Georgian states arises, Georgian officials are quite clear that there can be no meeting unless the main topic to be discussed is the de-occupation of the two Georgian breakaway regions. This ultimatum itself leads to an impasse in which there seems to be no way out unless one of the sides compromises on its core principles. Restoring an official diplomatic relationship would require Georgia to accept what Russian diplomats have many times called "new realities", i.e., the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Without such a move, reopening the Russian embassy to Georgia is extremely complicated both from a legal and political perspective.

It is important to emphasize that the existing impasse does not automatically guarantee that the dominant pro-Western discourse will survive and reproduce itself unless further progress is made towards integrating into the Euro-Atlantic institutions. If the Association Agreement and the visa-free regime of the European Union, as

well as the current NATO–Georgia package, represent the end of the journey, thus not offering a clear membership perspective, the niche for nationalistic and relatively anti-Western political discourse will grow. Moreover, parties such as the Alliance of Patriots will be able to fill this gap and further challenge the foreign policy agenda. The existence of a European perspective has a considerable impact on the domestic political agenda as well. The Association Agreement with the EU became a key driving force and justification for reforms, which sometimes come across as painful and difficult. The anti-discrimination bill which was adopted in 2011 is just one example. It was one of the requirements Georgian authorities had to deliver as part of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan.

As of July 2017, the parliaments of the Eastern Partnership countries that signed the Association Agreement (i.e., Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine) have issued a mutual declaration calling on the European Parliament to consider the membership perspective, citing Article 49 of the treaty of the European Union. In a way, a parallel can be drawn with the process of integrating into NATO, and it echoes what the speaker of the parliament of Georgia at that time, David Usupashvili, remarked in 2014, prior to the NATO summit in Wales. He claimed that “this magical word MAP [Membership Action Plan]” had become for Georgians symbolic of the answer to the question as to whether “the free world needs Georgia”, or “does the free world keep its promise that Georgia would become a NATO member?” (Usupashvili, as cited in Liklikadze 2014). In addition, within the same speech delivered in Tallinn, he argued that an answer of “no” would undermine political stability in Georgia. “One option is to take up arms and fight against the occupant country, which we do not want. The second is to become a member of free Europe and step by step achieve success. A third option is going back to a modernized Soviet Union or Russian empire. No other options exist. Hence, it will be hard to sell to the people the non-existence of progress or very small progress towards integration into NATO...It does not work anymore” (ibid).

To illustrate this point further, one could look at how the perception of the European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization among the Georgian population has changed over time. Whereas in 2009 and 2011 the combined share of those who thought of the relationship with the European Union as rather good

or very good amounted to over 40%, in 2013 and 2015 this number fell below 30%. 2017 saw a slight boost in the positive attitudes towards the EU with rather good and very good making up together about 35%. (Knowledge of and attitudes toward the EU in Georgia, 2009–2017) This can be explained by the Association Agreement and visa-free regime with the European Union, which created the impression that the pro-Western foreign policy was making progress. To illustrate this point further, another survey showed that in 2011 support for membership of the European Union stood at 69% in Georgia, while in 2015 it went down to 42%. Interestingly, the share of those who oppose EU membership tripled from 5% to about 16% over the same period (Caucasus Barometer 2017b). The same applies to support for NATO membership, which dropped from 70% in 2010 to 37% in 2015, while the share of those who are not in favour rose from 8% to 20%. (Caucasus Barometer 2017c).

The way the outcome of the Wales summit was branded and presented to the wider public should be understood in this context. NATO member states agreed that instead of a membership action plan, they would propose the substantial NATO–Georgia package (SNGP), which also implied the establishment of a joint training and evaluation centre. NATO Secretary General at that time, Anders Rasmussen, claimed that the package would prepare Georgia for membership (Civilge 2014), but somehow an actual membership perspective is always postponed. Looking back at late President Eduard Shevardnadze’s promise made in 1999—that by the year 2005, Georgia would be knocking on NATO’s door—today, it seems that the door is open; there is no need to knock anymore, but entry is still not possible.

Conclusion

To conclude what has been argued above, after signing the Association Agreement and achieving a visa-free regime with the European Union, the current pro-Western foreign policy discourse needs a further boost. A membership perspective or a related clear message from the West towards Georgia could serve as one. If this does not happen, Georgia will see an increase in Euro-sceptic sentiments and a rise in political entities serving them. Their influence will become even stronger if the Association Agreement with the EU is in fact the final destination of Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic journey rather than just one of the stops on the road.

About the Author

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